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## The Machiavelli Code:

### J.H. Hexter's Analysis of 'Lo Stato' in Relation to Problems of Meaning in the History of Ideas

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#### ***Abstract***

The historiographical field of the 'history of ideas' seeks to chart the historical development and progression of human ideas—particularly regarding (political) philosophy—by identifying and tracing 'strands' of thought that appear to link together the works and themes of various eras into distinct and discrete philosophical 'traditions'. However, such an integration of historically disparate terms within a single overarching anthology (viz. *the* 'history of ideas')—a project steeped in the Enlightenment—is heavily predicated on the assumption that all these ideas are semantically reducible to culturally universal 'building-blocks' which manifest as historically recurring 'mono-themes' such as 'justice', 'peace' and (political) 'authority'. This article will seek to challenge this unwarranted faith in the historical transparency and in-principle commensurability of political theories. Through J.H. Hexter's compelling re-interpretation of Machiavelli's *Il Principe*, it will be demonstrated how his inconsistent and shifting use of terminology frustrates holistic or a-historical readings of semantic continuity, as it particularly undermines the validity of the modern translation (through historical and philosophical linking) of his seminal '*Lo Stato*' with our 'State'. This hints at significant hermeneutic limits to any interpretation or cultural translation that fails to consider the particular *context* (historical; cultural; authorial) within which a concept emerged.

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### Overview

“Writing intellectual history is like trying to nail jelly to the wall.”

~William Hesselntine

When we deal with the past there are, it seems, always two sides to consider: one is that of factual ‘history’, the study of which concerns itself solely with the truthful recording of the physical events of the past. As a result, its methods draw on evaluating a host of material sources ranging from archaeological excavations to personal diaries and more, as it seeks to provide an objective, thorough report on the lives and actions of generations and civilizations gone by. ‘*The History of Ideas*’, conversely, is a [sub]field which focuses rather on the non-material, but no less influential ideas—religious, political, philosophical—produced by these people and often directly fuelling the course of history. Inasmuch as this project wishes to construct a comprehensive anthology of human thought throughout the ages, it, like the study of history itself, has nowhere to turn but the primary sources; the words of the ‘Great’ philosophers and visionaries that speckle all eras.

This paper will be one in this latter tradition; seeking to comment on the historical development and influence of philosophical and political thought. Yet within this tradition it will be unorthodox through the limited and highly particular choice of the academic groundwork; an analysis of- and commentary upon J.H. Hexter’s 1957 paper ‘*Il Principe and Lo Stato*’<sup>1</sup>. At this point it must be stressed, however, that this paper is not so much about the particular characteristics, merits, flaws or even specific conclusions of Hexter’s analysis; rather, Hexter’s paper becomes a means to an end as the ultimate goal of this essay will be to understand and further explore what his conclusions and observations reveal about the shifting nature and role of concepts and context within the philosophy of history at large.

In his work Hexter challenges the notion, prevalent within the academic community at the time and still widespread these days, that—notwithstanding some inevitable but minor semantic shifts inherent to translation—interpretation and understanding of primary texts remains rather straightforward. In effect, this theory holds that we should be capable of understanding precisely what a philosopher *means* in writing this or that no matter what era he is from. In this view, one can interpret key terms and concepts within a philosopher’s text simply by consistently resorting

<sup>1</sup> Hexter, J.H. *Il Principe and Lo Stato*. Studies in the Renaissance. Vol. 4 [1957]. Pp. 113-138. What makes this a startling selection is that not only is it exclusively secondary literature, with all reference and meaning imbued in the primary sources which are its object of enquiry; but moreover Hexter’s formalistic, empirical approach and statistical methodology seem a long shot—stylistically if not in substance—from the kind of political, philosophical or historical treatises we might have come to expect to encounter in studying the history of ideas. Still, as will be argued, this project will be a worthwhile one insofar as Hexter’s observations, which in the first instance are solely made in reference to Machiavelli, can be interpreted to have far more far-reaching implications for the study of the history of thought itself. More on this shortly.

to and wielding their modern-day meanings and connotations. Putting this orthodoxy to the test, Hexter applies it to *Il Principe* ('The Prince'), the controversial political treatise by the infamous Renaissance writer Nicolò Machiavelli. In doing so, Hexter shows how this conventional approach will clearly falter when applied to Machiavelli's notoriously flexible and inconsistent use of vocabulary. Choosing to focus on Machiavelli's concept of *Lo Stato*, which is commonly presumed to be close to [or indeed the foundation of] our modern, liberal notion of the organized 'state', Hexter indexes all the various occurrences of this term within *The Prince*. Consequently, using a highly statistical analysis and comparison of the various contexts wherein it appeared, Hexter argued convincingly that one can simply not capture all the wildly distinct ways Machiavelli used *Lo Stato* under any one umbrella term. Moreover, he showed that even the most common use of that term within *The Prince* is still at great variance with the modern meaning of the concept of 'State'.

Hexter's analysis here is very potent, but even more significant to the present paper is his underlying objection against the way contemporary historians and philosophers of his time systematically misread, and thus, unwittingly 'hijacked'<sup>2</sup> famous writings of the past by interpreting these texts without being fully aware of the historical and personal context in which they were written. As such, he warns us to consider context as well as content. To understand the scope and impact of this argument we should start by clarifying the origin of the very notion of 'key concepts' in the history of ideas.

### **A Concept of History, and a History of Concepts**

History, in its prime instance, seems plain and simple enough to grasp; we all can summon it in a myriad of timeless scenes grafted into our collective memory; a Greek philosopher is charged by his city-state to ingest poison for his views; a master strategist and aspiring politician is stabbed to death before the Roman Senate; an upstart priest sparks a religious schism by hammering his theological Protests onto a German Church's doors; an Austrian colonel watches his chanting, uniformed followers pile Jewish books onto a pyre.

The rich—and bloody—tapestry of history time and time again affirms the paramount presence and power of something peculiarly human: ideas. For while material circumstances—geography and resources—are undeniably at the very base of human existence, it took substantial abstract thought to 'ascend' to ever higher levels of social, technological or political development. Whether it was the practical ingenuity that produced the phalanx, the crossbow and the cannon, or the political and religious doctrines that determined against whom these would be used, it would seem that political or philosophical ideas and systems should be considered among the most powerful forces that define human nature, the meaning and structure of his world, and ultimately the course of his history.

It is not so surprising, then, that history becomes its own mirror, producing ideas about itself—and, again, producing ideas about its own ideas. As such, scholars of history and philosophy must not merely take stock of 'first-stage' views—those historic treatises directly dealing with and responding to the prevalent political and moral problems of their time—but crucially also of the 'second-stage' theories which, while often closely intertwined with the initial social recipes, rather

<sup>2</sup> Note though that these methodological notions—that completely ignore 'context' and only focus on 'content'—prevail and prosper within academia even today.

reflect on the more universal nature of these practical precepts, their reason for existing and their role in the grand currents of history<sup>3</sup>. We therefore continue to study the great moral, political and philosophical giants of the past, not necessarily because we believe their ideas constitute flawless, full-fledged or [to us] desirable blueprints for *Utopia*, but because we view a certain understanding of them as indispensable to a proper analysis and appreciation of the political possibilities—and perils—of our own world.

Consider, for instance, how within the modern-day physical sciences, Galileo and Newton, whose ideas are in a strict sense incorrect or incomplete, are still commonly taught insofar as their models sufficiently approximate the reality of utility—quantum mechanics, though ‘true’ [or ‘true-er’ than classical mechanics] is of little use to the engineer designing a bridge. In much the same way, academics within the social sciences and humanities continuously seek and are given opportunities to distil, revive, or repurpose past ideas—whole doctrines or specific tenets—with the aim to create new, intelligible and successful ground rules. Echoing the age-old metaphor, uttered most famously by Newton<sup>4</sup>, of the dwarf seeing further because he is standing on the shoulder of giants, many contemporary thinkers conceive of the numerous branches of political thought as exactly that—the widespread branches of an ultimately singular Tree of Knowledge which, though some branches snap or wither, on the whole reaches ever higher; a globally ascending structure, transcending human generations and continuously improving as its various discourses compete and complement each other in a dialectic manner.<sup>5</sup> Hence the unspoken but pervading dream driving the study of history, one that has fuelled historians and philosophers since ancient times, seems to be the prospect, no matter how far hence, of a unified and conclusive understanding of the motives, processes and forces that drive history, as well as of the role, if any, of human nature and free agency therein, so that we can, as it were, derive from this eternally valid model a greater control over our own destiny and now-mature experience. Of course, assuming that such a project is even at all possible and not simply a philosophical red herring, one may well question if [re] turning to the ‘tried-and-terrible’<sup>6</sup> remedies of the past is indeed the key.

Regardless, there are quite naturally a great many views of- and on history; from it being an objective and unified record of past human affairs; a pre-destined unfolding of a transcendent design<sup>7</sup>, to a tragic and ultimately cyclic<sup>8</sup> ‘progression of victors [and victims] throughout time’. Particularly prevalent in many writings of the modern period, however, is a fascination with what are perceived as ‘recurring’ ideas; in drawing upon such categories as ‘metaphysics’, ‘theology’, and ‘epistemology’, for instance, and appending these names to wildly different texts from distinct historical backgrounds, modern [Western] academic philosophy has come to assume—and rely upon—a range of ‘conceptual currents’ throughout history which center themselves around a number of ‘universal human themes’. These ‘mono-themes’ are seminal topics that most, if not all philosophers of note, will come to or perhaps even need to deal with. These include such questions

3 Notice that the second-stage view might easily deem primary ideas as having a negative historical role—i.e. being corrosive to a [desirable] society. Consider for instance Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

4 “If I have seen a little further it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants.” Letter to Robert Hooke (Feb. 5 1676)

5 Cf. Hegel, G.W.F. *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*. 1837.

6 Inasmuch as all moral codes and systems of government so far have fallen short of the ideal society in unfailingly resulting in greater or lesser degrees of injustice, unhappiness or unfreedom. To retain flawed materials in the construction of a flawless product appears, at least to me, a *contradictio in terminis*.

7 Both in a theological, spiritual or metaphysical—as per St. Augustine and Hegel—but also a structural, materialist sense [as per Marx].

8 “History does not repeat itself. The Historians repeat one another” ~Max Beerbohm

of virtue, justice, liberty, peace and social stability. Therefore, even if the answers we find differ throughout different times, cultures or circumstances, the history of ideas, it is supposed, is unified in the self same perennial questions that are raised everywhere and every time.

### Echoes of Babel

It is interesting to observe how the aforementioned ‘scientific’ project of systematic and objective exploration and discourse on the one hand, and this pre-eminent notion of universal and timeless precepts on the other, together come remarkably close to the central tenets of the liberal doctrine as it arose during the Enlightenment. Inasmuch as our modern society is very much based on that period, it is only to be expected that we reason within the same paradigm and raise the same questions. Perhaps it is from here, then, that the aforementioned concept of universal human ‘mono-themes’ in philosophical thought arises. This premise, it seems at first, we might yet grant without much ado; while an argument could ostensibly be made demonstrating that this or that unique philosophic theme has been historically or culturally exclusive to a single people, the principal body majority of moral problems, broadly conceived, seems to remain universal even if different personal experiences manifest themselves in wildly diverging questions<sup>9</sup>. However, it must subsequently be conceded that these political mono-themes require little beyond a shared global interest. Hence, the concept ‘human nature’ can be said to be such a mono-theme insofar as virtually every philosopher must make assertions about it if he is to write of human politics at all. However, this then leaves free different thinkers to assert a range of philosophical positions on the matter that vary tremendously from one another. For instance, Machiavelli and Hobbes, in their own ways, both cast human nature as innately selfish, whereas Hume allows for at least a measure of honour. Rousseau, in turn, rejects the very concept of a ‘fixed’ human nature.

It can therefore be argued, that this premise of universal human themes itself is in fact largely meaningless since it makes no profound analytic claim, rather depending on a circular argument along the lines of *‘this topic X is indispensable if you want to talk about human social problems at all. All human societies deal with human social problems. Therefore all human societies deal with topic X’*. In other words, it seems a tautology to argue that all human beings deal with the problems that all human beings encounter. At this point, the various categories have to be so loosely defined to be almost void of reference. Regardless, this argument will not be pursued further, since, either way, the crucial point is that, insofar as we do grant that these are key concepts which many if not all thinkers use, have used, and seemingly must use, the question remains if they are still linked; if there is an underlying structure. The answer to this question is crucial for the liberal Enlightenment project represented in our modern academia, for if these philosophical themes are indeed universal—if humans everywhere, at every time, share certain similar questions, then this means that any valid answers or solutions we find to these questions will also be universal: in the same way that [in physics] deducing a natural law allows us to advance technology for all humanity, we hope it becomes possible to decisively ‘solve’ social problems not just for one particular event, but for all time. The established school of analysis holds that we can discover many implicit links from one philosopher to another and can hence, fit them into ‘strands’ of meaning wherein concepts build and improve upon another. Hence, texts and concepts from profoundly different thinkers and backgrounds are lumped together into one integrated tradition

<sup>9</sup> Quentin Skinner would disagree, however, arguing rather that all intellectual expressions in history—indeed verbal expressions as a rule—are *a priori* individual and in- or only imperfectly accessible. See for instance Skinner, Q. (2002) *Visions of Politics: Volume 1: Regarding Method*, [Cambridge].



of philosophical thought, as specific terms used by one thinker are conceptually equated with their translated or grammatical equivalents as used by another—so when a writer, whether Marx or Machiavelli, speaks of ‘states’, we think we can in both situations wield our [modern] notion of the state in understanding them. It is this exact oversimplification of ideas which Hexter seeks to challenge in his exposition of Machiavelli.

### **Machiavelli: The End Justifies the Meanness**

It must by now be somewhat clear why there is such an interest in Machiavelli, and why concepts are of such fundamental importance to the examination of history. It is quite self-evident that our modern Western society, with all its values and self-evident assumptions, was forged in the revolutionary fires of the 18th century; the Enlightenment saw, for the first time perhaps in over a millennia, a widespread, almost virulent intellectual fermentation on the European continent. Amongst its many fruits was a highly optimistic faith in human progress as moderated by the scientific venture. Simultaneously, the French and American Revolutions, with their “*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*”, and “...*the pursuit of happiness*” respectively, laid the groundwork for a *Weltanschauung* wherein moral precepts and considerations held value not for one specific class of people at one time, but became universal: for all people, for all time.

As argued, we can find these twin Enlightenment legacies kept alive in our modern academia in both its scientific positivism and its desire to provide timeless, objective and clear definitions not just of scientific phenomena, but also—crucially—of social ones. This itself, amplified by the classical liberal devotion to unchanging, absolute Reason—a Reason that, it demands, must have been as accessible and unchanging for Machiavelli and Locke as for us—is instrumental in accounting for the pervading wish to impose our value systems and our individual sets of meaning upon readings centuries removed from us.

When examining such a profound thinker as Machiavelli, then, one should firstly keep in mind that he himself was not, at least in the historical sense, a philosopher of the Enlightenment; he never saw that era come to fruition. Far from it; his time was the Renaissance, which, nevertheless, is a close second where it comes to intellectual fervour. Yet the question asserts itself; why read him as a champion and case example for a study of Enlightenment political thought? For one, Machiavelli fulfilled the role of the first real *enfant terrible* of moral philosophy by challenging the orthodox Christian unity of politics and morality, and by introducing and redefining the terms and units of political discourse—for whether or not his works and concepts are ultimately as accessible and intelligible to us as we formerly believed, it seems at least certain that he broke ever more profoundly with the prevailing and dominant narratives of his time. As such, he is often considered the vanguard of modern political philosophy, laying the groundwork, whether or not knowingly, for many of the theories and worldviews that his ‘successors’ would come to properly and fully flesh out in the Liberal Enlightenment<sup>10</sup>

The question remains, however, if this account can be at all justified by an appeal to Machiavelli’s own

<sup>10</sup> One problem remains however; while it might be accepted that he influenced later writers to a degree, his profoundly realist *Weltanschauung*, so inimical to classical liberal optimism and faith in progress, would seem to countermand the claim that Machiavelli was in any meaningful sense a real ‘progenitor’ of liberalism. This does not on itself exclude the claim that he was pivotal in shaping *modern* thought, however; many in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who involved themselves with politics—both scholars and policymakers—expressed great admiration for the Italian. The question remains, however, whether or not they were all misreading him.

writings. This is the precise project Hexter undertakes when he tries to interpret the Italian's use of 'Lo Stato', which, as mentioned, has been considered by many to be the first broad formulation of the territorial authoritative state which in modern times was most famously formulated by scholars like Weber. Note, incidentally, that this is not questioning whether Machiavelli—or in general terms, any traditionally 'influential' philosopher—had and continues to have an impact on people's ideas. This itself cannot be denied. What is being questioned, however, is whether Machiavelli—and others—would recognize 'their' ideas in the way they are nowadays attributed to them as profoundly theirs at all.

For, in the case of 'Lo Stato', Hexter convincingly argues that, by use of the aforementioned rigid yet comprehensive statistical methods, 'the state' as denoted by 'Lo Stato' is much closer to a personal possession, a tool for the sake of the prince and one inexorably tied to its singular ruler's personality traits<sup>11</sup>. Yet even this definition, patently at odds with our modern 'state', can only be distilled through great trouble and speculation, as Machiavelli routinely switches and intermingles his terms, at times giving other meanings to 'lo Stato', at times giving said 'majority meaning' to other words. One can also observe this in the case of *virtù*, the elusive 'prime trait' of the Prince, which yet cannot and should not be identified with our modern concept of *Virtue*, but rather, possesses a variety of connotations [note again Machiavelli's plastic and versatile use of concepts] from 'skill' to 'strength' to 'manliness' and more, not just on the field of battle but also—perhaps more so—in the corridors of power. The same holds for his *Stato*, which is clearly far more different and flexible in meaning than scholars have given it credit for.

### Prospect, Practice and Programme

So how then, should we go about reading the texts of the past? Are they wholly inaccessible to us, we who can neither possess nor understand the intrinsic personal experiences of their authors? Not so, certainly; but Hexter's findings do urge for a renewed sense of caution and academic humility. Within the example of Machiavelli, for instance, one has to consider, not just the context of specific concepts or words, but, on a grander scale, also the context of the man himself; his world of experience. Machiavelli's time, at least as much as ours, was one of conflict and political manoeuvring between city-states, weaving in and about an expansionist Papal States that was increasingly asserting the primacy of the spiritual over material power and wealth. Being at the center of a world in conflict—arguably more directly and fully than we today can understand—thoroughly shaped not simply his practical conclusions and imperatives, but also, and this we often overlook, his most basic moral premises.

Secondly, we have to keep into account that even the best translations of ancient works are always inherently subject to at least a degree of interpretation and re-definition. As words are the primary, indeed the only conveyors of ideas, we cannot but use them if we don't want to get lost utterly, but throughout this, we must always remember that translations remain innately imperfect substitutes. Especially as political language inherently is more fluid and inclusive than the terminology of mathematical or scientific discourses, we should take the utmost care to define, and agree upon, stable definitions if we are not to misrepresent and misunderstand each other—and the past.

Thirdly, we have to remember that texts written centuries ago did not—could not—have taken stock of all the historical, intellectual and philosophical developments since, which do however,

<sup>11</sup> Bringing—or rather keeping—the concept much more closer to medieval, feudal notions of *Dominium*.

perhaps inadvertently, influence our experience and understanding. In other words, the people of the past could only look at *their own* past, whereas we can also look at their future; so we can see, for instance, that ideas that seemed very sensible and good to them in their time would later turn out flawed or even dangerous. As a result, however, it would be an error to judge and denounce the people of the past by modern paradigms of [moral] thinking, if they themselves never even had access to these, for we will do nothing but play a smug, senseless joke on the dead.<sup>12</sup>

Fourthly, we have to consider the author's own intentions and accept a degree of uncertainty; most of all we must prevent from projecting and the sort of 'reverse linking' which retroactively derives a text's goals based upon the influence or social impact it would come to have. Generally, we have to understand that many authors at their times, publishing also for popular audiences, did not seek to trumpet some abstract, remote universal idea, but rather first and foremost sought to respond to immediate political exigencies, and only secondarily, as a result thereof, seek to embed these in more general historic trends. In the case of Machiavelli, it has to be kept in mind that he wrote his *Prince* with the implicit, if not the primary intent, to get back into Lorenzo de Medici's favour. And since other writings of him suggest a preference for a stable republican system of governance, it might be argued that *The Prince* was little more than a sycophant's Machiavellian bid for political amnesty.

Again, all this is not to say that any given thinker is *a priori* inaccessible or entirely isolated from his predecessors. It merely cautions the student of history against taking it from its own inalienable context; certainly this is making the task of interpretation all the harder, but simultaneously it holds promise of yet greater understanding. Thus, whether or not we may ever truly discover the dream of the liberal-scientific project, this small piece of advice will help us not to wander astray on the road there. And that is as much as we can ask of it.

In the end, maybe Hexter's greatest achievement lies in bringing us to a pause, making us look up from our keyboards, and wondering how the future will judge and read our own words.

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<sup>12</sup> Note how this also seems to suggest a more *historical* approach for academic discourse, as opposed to the presently dominant scientific one.



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